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DESCRIPTORS- *CORE CURRICULUM, *SOCIOCULTURAL PATTERNS, *CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT, *STUDENT DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE, *MIDDLE SCHOOLS,

A CURRICULUM DESIGN WHICH APPEARS APPROPRIATE TO THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS IS DESCRIBED. BECAUSE OF RAPID CHANGE AND HIGHLY VARIABLE INDIVIDUAL GROWTH PATTERNS, THE MIDDLE SCHOOL HAS THE MOST DIVERSE STUDENT BODY OF ANY SCHOOL UNIT. VARIED THOUGH THE STUDENTS MAY BE, DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS AT THIS AGE INCLUDE ACHIEVING SELF-UNDERSTANDING TO REACH A STABLE SELF-CONCEPT AND ACQUIRING THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ATTITUDES ESSENTIAL FOR GOOD HUMAN RELATIONS. A CURRICULUM DESIGN MUST TAKE PROPER ACCOUNT OF A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MILIEU CHARACTERIZED BY VALUE CONFLICTS, STRESS, ROLE CHANGES, AND ACCELERATING SOCIAL CHANGE. ANY MEANINGFUL DESIGN MUST ALSO INCLUDE HOW MAN ORGANIZES, EXPANDS, AND INTERRELATES KNOWLEDGE. A PROGRAM THAT GIVES ADEQUATE AND BALANCED ATTENTION TO THE LEARNER, TO SOCIETY, AND TO ORGANIZED KNOWLEDGE IS NEEDED. THE AUTHOR QUESTIONS THE VALUE OF CURRICULUMS BUILT AROUND THE ORGANIZED FIELDS OF KNOWLEDGE. SPECIALIZATION, THE KNOWLEDGE EXPLOSION, INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, AND THE RAPID CHANGES IN ADOLESCENTS CALL FOR A CONTINUOUS, NONGRADED, VERTICAL PROGRESSION THROUGH LEARNING EXPERIENCES WITH GENUINE SEQUENTIAL ORGANIZATION IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM DESIGN. A CORE CURRICULUM GIVES THE NECESSARY FLEXIBILITY IN GROUPING, SCHEDULING, AND ORGANIZATION. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE CONFERENCE OF THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION (11TH, UNIV. OF TOLEDO, OHIO, NOVEMBER 11, 1967). (WR)

New Knowledge of the Learner and His Cultural Milieu: Implications for Schooling in the Middle Years*

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Effective schooling for any age or grade level must take into account the learner and how he learns, the contemporary social and cultural milieu, and the way man organizes and adds to the knowledge he has accumulated through the ages. Previous speakers in this conference have explored the rationale for the middle school,[1] new knowledge about young people approximately 10 through 13 years of age,[2] and contemporary American society.[3] Drawing upon these and other sources of insights into the current educational scene, this paper describes a curriculum design that appears to this writer to be especially appropriate for young people during their "in-between" years.[4]

The Learner

Eichborn applies the term "transescent" to the young person who is approaching or passing through puberty, or who has but

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recently experienced this notable event. What he says about today's transescent can be summed up in one word - precocity. He asserts that young people today reach physical, social, and intellectual maturity at a younger chronological age than did previous generations. That young people reach puberty earlier is a biological fact that can be verified. Whether social and intellectual precocity is a necessary concomitant of this physiological acceleration is a different matter. Bauer has convincingly argued that adolescence is primarily a culturally-induced phenomenon in Western societies.[5] It may well be that because modern nutrition makes young people larger and physically more mature than our generation was at the same age, we expect them to have the social and intellectual interests of older persons. When young people, in response to these expectations actually do behave in a more sophisticated manner, our self-fulfilling prophecy is indeed fulfilled. Whatever the causes, it does appear that precocity is a characteristic of many transescents today, a fact that must be considered in designing a curriculum for this age group.

However, the sophistication of the more visible members of the younger generation should not blind us to the fact that there are vast differences both between and within individuals. Coleman has noted marked differences between suburban and rural youth,[6] and we are all thoroughly familiar with the different rates at which boys and girls mature. It has been truly said that in the middle school we have men, women, and children occupying the same classroom.

Moreover, each individual grows according to his own timetable, which varies from month to month and is not even the same for all aspects of his development. Witness the boy whose bones have temporarily outgrown the capacity of his muscles to handle them effectively, or the girl who for a brief period is "all nose." A compounding of rapid change and highly variable individual growth patterns gives the middle school the most diverse student body of any school unit. A teacher quite literally faces a different group of children each time he meets a particular class.

Arising in part from these characteristics and heavily influenced by societal forces, young people have identifiable personal-social needs or developmental tasks. Clearly, self-understanding would be at the top of the list for any young person going through such a period of change. As Eichhorn puts it, maturing at an earlier age "creates personal needs which challenge personal security."[7] Adolescence in our culture frequently brings with it a crisis of identity, and the increasing complexity of our society can only intensify the difficulties of establishing a stable self-concept.

A second major need or task is to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for good human relations. The adolescent's traditional preoccupation with peer-group relations is described by Eichhorn and certainly needs no further documentation, nor should it be necessary to point to the burgeoning crises in human relations evident at all levels of human society.

Truly, survival of mankind on this planet depends upon the success with which young and old deal with this ancient problem.

When we examine current conceptions of how learning takes place, we encounter such terms as discovery, inquiry, critical thinking, and the like. Although there may be some differences among these concepts, all assume that some kind of problem solving is taking place. Hence they give psychological support for the problem-centered approach to instruction long advocated by certain educators. A number of modern learning theorists have focused attention on the learner's perception of the world. They assert that the change in potential behavior that we call learning is primarily a result of the learner's changed perceptions, at least at the higher levels of functioning that are the main concern of the school. Hence effective learning requires direct involvement of the learner in identifying his present perceptions and in evaluating their adequacy. Even psychologists who emphasize conditioning and reinforcement recognize that whether a stimulus provides positive or negative reinforcement depends upon how it is perceived.

The Social and Cultural Milieu

Yamamoto's insightful examination of contemporary American society gives a great deal of attention to values, with special emphasis on the need to develop people with moral courage, commitment, or dedication. The apparent contradiction between what he calls the "hard-labor tradition" and the concept of

meaningful leisure is but one of the many value conflicts that he identifies in analyzing the predicament of the child in our pluralistic society. In his words:

> It is not easy to be a child in the world today and tomorrow. Evidently, he is under considerable stress, being required to serve many masters at one and the same time. The child is to learn both to "get along with" others and to "get ahead of" others ("bureaucratic" and "entrepreneurial" orientations, respectively). He is to help compensate for all the frustration, anxiety, and humiliation which his father suffers outside in the dehumanized, industrial world, and which his mother experiences in playing the confusing roles of the American female. Living in an urban enclave or in suburban homogeneity, he is expected to learn to make social adaptations with little cross-group experience. He is to learn proper sex, vocational, and life roles when these are not clearly defined and where no adequate models are available. He is encouraged to grow, yes, but grow into what kind of world? A world in which no human significance is felt, no humility is left, and no escape is seen from either the desperate population explosion or the threat of thermonuclear annihilation? Why should he grow at all, especially when he is not recognized as a full-share participant in spite of having all his future at stake?[8]

A curriculum that takes proper account of this state of affairs must encourage students to raise "the basic questions that lie at the deepest level of man's existence,"[9] as they seek a satisfying pattern of values.

Both Eichhorn and Yamamoto point to accelerating social change as another salient feature of our contemporary world, attributing much of this to developments in technology. Social change, a multiplicity of values, and the sheer increase in human population guarantee that mankind will have plenty of social problems to wrestle with for many eons to come. To Yamamoto's discussion of changes in religion, leisure, family life, business-industry, and the state we might add civil rights problems, war and peace, conservation of natural resources, urbanization, and a host of others. Human interaction obviously is a major factor in all of these. This reinforces the need for improved human relations that was identified earlier, and elevates to top priority the value identified by Yamamoto as "historical identification" or "we-ness" among all human beings.

Knowledge

Jerome Bruner deserves credit for once again making it respectable to give organized knowledge its rightful place as a basic consideration in curriculum design. Whether or not one accepts his premise that instruction should reveal the structure of the various disciplines, it is true that schools have a responsibility to give students some conception of how man organizes and expands his knowledge. The basic issue revolves around how early in life a student should be introduced to the formal structure of a discipline <u>as a discipline</u>. In the discussion that follows, the position is taken that senior high

school and college levels are quite early enough to begin direct orientation to the scholarly disciplines, although this must obviously be based upon concepts, understandings, skills, and values developed in earlier grades.

In the generation of new knowledge, specialization has been and continues to be a powerful tool. At the same time, scholars from many disciplines decry the narrow vision that may result from carrying this to an extreme. Marshall McLuhan puts it this way:

"Specialization won't work any more as a means of learning. The only technique today for obtaining depth is by interrelating knowledge, whether it be in physics or anthropology or anything else. When a men attempts to study anything, he crosses the boundaries of that field almost as soon as he begins to look into it.[10]"

Needed are both scholars and ordinary citizens who can generalize intelligently when the occasion demands, who try to see life whole. The well-documented knowledge explosion, brought about to a large extent by specialization, also demands the kind of person who can discover the broad principle lurking behind the mountain of detail. Moreover, the proliferation of knowledge intensifies man's need for improved "information-consumption skills," to use Luvern Cunningham's phrase.[11]

Implications for Schooling

Assuming that the foregoing is a reasonably accurate assessment of the current situation, what does this suggest for the

middle school curriculum? Needed is a program that gives adequate and balanced attention to the learner, to society, and to organized knowledge.

There are many merits in the curriculum design proposed by Alexander. Certainly a middle school must provide opportunities for counseling, for the development of values, for health and physical development, for exploration of many interests, for the development of learning skills, and for acquiring knowledge. Nevertheless, a number of grave limitations stem from his division of the curriculum into three areas - personal development, learning skills, and organized knowledge - with a different cadre of teachers for each area.[12]

The proposed "home-base group led by a teacher-counselor," a key instrument in the personal development area, can serve many valuable group guidance functions, but by being divorced from instruction it inherets many of the weaknesses of present-day homeroom programs. Homeroom activities that are not related directly to the school's curriculum, and hence carry no academic credit and receive no grades, are too often viewed by students and teachers alike as trivial and unimportant.

Moreover, there does not appear to be any provision for the study in depth needed to undergird the discussion of current events or the selection of recreational reading, television programs, motion pictures, etc., that are to take place in the home-base group. The value questions inherent in these matters might better be explored as part of a full-scale study of current

social problems or an examination of contemporary culture that includes all the humanities.

Similarly, having a separate portion of the program devoted to the development of skills for continued learning overlooks the importance of learning skills functionally, in context, by actually employing them in examining issues and problems that are meaningful to students. True, it is suggested that the faculty should identify "skills which are to be emphasized in all learning situations,"[13] but it appears that independent study is to be the major approach in this aspect of the curriculum. Skills are not likely to be closely related to human problems and unresolved social issues if "such independent studies usually emanate from one of the fields of organized knowledge."[14]

It is this persistent emphasis on the organized fields of knowledge that reveals a preoccupation with this curriculum determinant. The curriculum is to provide "a planned sequence of concepts in the general education areas,"[15] and the third major aspect of the curriculum is entitled "The Area of Organized Knowledge." It consists of "systematic instruction in the subject fields of generally provided in all schools and at all levels: English, mathematics, science, and social studies."[16] Students are to understand"basic concepts in the various disciplines" and "the significance of organized knowledge."[17] Yet, at the same time, there is to be an emphasis on "the individual's mastery of such ways of thinking about and attacking questions and problems as will yield reliable answers and solutions" and

"the application of mathematics and language skills and of basic concepts in science and social studies to everyday activities and problems."[18] It appears to the writer that a curriculum built around the organized fields of knowledge is of questionable value as a vehicle for developing problem-solving abilities or for demonstrating practical application of concepts and skills.

In short, despite its many valuable features,Alexander's proposed middle school curriculum is flawed by its overemphasis on organized knowledge and by its arbitrary and mischievous divisions between the personal development, learning skills, and organized knowledge components .

A deliberate attempt to keep in focus all three curriculum determinants - the learner, society, and knowledge - leads this writer to propose a middle school curriculum consisting of three quite different components. First, there needs to be some place in the curriculum where a student can deal directly with the problems, both personal and social, that surround him. It should not be necessary for him to detour through a study of one or more disciplines as they are organized by scholars for the purpose of promoting further scholarship. In this examination of problems he should have access to at least one adult who knows and cares for him personally. This is necessary if he is to have adequate help in coming to terms with his changing self, in wrestling with value conflicts and in examining his perceptions of many aspects of experience. Dealing with problems "in the round" also is a direct application of what appears to

be the best of modern learning theory. Needless to say, mankind's persistent social problems would also be subject to examination, probing as deeply as students' maturity and experience permit.

To this writer, the best vehicle for this kind of education is the core curriculum. At its best, core provides students with an opportunity to examine both personal and social problems that have meaning to them, it provides a situation in which a teacher can know a limited number of students well enough to offer the advisement or counseling they need so badly during the transition years, and in the process they can learn essential human relations and communication skills. A core teacher, freed from the compulsion to "put across" prescribed subject matter, can fulfill the role of confidant and guide to the transescents in his charge. Indeed, he may approach the role of a farmer, nurturing and cultivating living and growing beings, as envisaged in the agricultural metaphor which Stephens applies to education.[19]

True, fully-developed core programs are rare, but the idea is essentially sound and can be achieved if teachers, administrators, college personnel, and other educators will work at it. Much, but not all, of the content and skills traditionally taught in English, social studies, and science classes may be better taught in core, where they become tools to be utilized in the process of inquiry.

But how do we take account of specialization and the knowledge explosion, not to mention the individual differences and rapid changes that characterize the middle school youngster? These

considerations call for a different kind of curriculum pattern, one that provides for continuous, nongraded, vertical progress through those learning experience that have a genuine sequential organization. Perhaps mathematics and foreign language are the best examples here, but skill areas such as reading and the laboratory aspects of science also may be dealt with in this way. Students can successfully move through these sequences at their own rates of speed, provided that they also have a stable, home-base group of their social-emotional peers to provide the necessary security. Thus the nongraded and the core portions of the curriculum complement one another.

What about the other activities and programs typically found in the schools? Are they best approached through the problem-centered core, through a carefully sequenced nongraded program, or through some other curriculum structure? Areas such as art and music fit both the core and the nongraded patterns. Core problems often require insights and experiences in art and music for proper consideration. Witness the expansion of humanities programs at both the junior and senior high school level, many of which bear the earmarks of the core curriculum. On the other hand, the skill or performance aspects of these fields are sequential in nature and should be offered in some kind of continuous progress arrangement. Home economics and industrial arts may be approached best in groups of students divided, like the core classes, primarily on the basis of social-emotional maturity. Physical education, on the other hand, may

be best handled in groups formed on the basis of physical maturity or skill, while interest will probably continue to be the main determinant of grouping in the student activities program.

Learning programs of such diverse natures clearly call for flexibility in grouping, scheduling, and curriculum organization. The guidelines here, as in the middle school's overall curriculum design, should be the learner characteristics, societal demands, and nature of knowledge as they apply to each field. Flexibility, then, is the key word in this third component of the middle school program.

How feasible is such a program? All of its elements already exist in some form in the schools today. In fact, this plan may appear to be nothing more than "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue(?)." Yet the best curriculum for the middle school may, in truth, represent a "marriage" of the best features of the elementary school with the best from the high school. The most promising curriculum offspring of this union might well embody these three concepts: core, nongrading, and flexibility.

NOTES

1. William M. Alexander, "The Middle School - What Is It?"
2. Donald H. Eichhorn, "New Knowledge of 10 through 13 Year Olds."
3. Kaoru Yamamoto, "America in Which Our Children Will Live: An Educational Perspective."
4. Portions of the following discussion are drawn from a forthcoming book in the Bold New Venture series of Indiana University Press entitled Current Concepts of Core Curriculum, edited by Gordon F. Vars.
5. Francis C. Bauer, "Fact and Folklore About Adolescents," Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, Vol. 49, No. 299 (March, 1965), p.174.
6. James S. Coleman, "Social Change: Impact on the Adolescent," Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, Vol. 49, No. 300 (April, 1965), p. 14.
7. Eichhorn, op. cit., p. 12.
8. Yamamoto, op. cit., pp. 16-17.
9. Ibid., p. 6.
10. Marshall McLuhan, "From Instruction to Discovery," Media and Methods, 3(October, 1966), p. 8.
11. Luvern Cunningham, "Top Priorities for the Principal: Improving Curriculum and Instruction," an address delivered at the 1967 Fall Conference of the Ohio Association of Secondary-School Principals, Columbus, Ohio, October 22, 1967.
12. Alexander, op. cit., p. 17.
13. Ibid., p. 14.
14. Ibid., p. 15.
15. Ibid., p. 8.

16. Ibid., p. 15.

17. Ibid., p. 16.

18. Ibid.

19. J. M. Stephens, The Process of Schooling (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), pp. 9-11, as cited in Yamamoto, op. cit., pp. 22-24.